

UMC Deacons and Sacramental Authority - Guidelines and Best Practices

The 2020/2024 Book of Discipline ¶328 “From the earliest days of the church, deacons were called and set apart for the ministry of Love, Justice, and Service and for connecting the church with the most needy, neglected, and marginalized among the children of God...It is the deacons, in both person and function, whose distinctive ministry is to embody, articulate, and lead the whole people of God in its servant ministry. Deacons fulfill servant ministry in the world and lead the Church in relating the gathered life of Christians to their ministries in the world, interrelating worship in the gathered community with service to God in the world. Deacons give leadership in the Church’s life: in teaching and proclaiming the Word; in contributing in worship, in assisting the elders in administering the sacraments of baptism and Holy Communion, or in presiding at the celebration of the sacraments when contextually appropriate...For the sake of extending the mission and ministry of the church and offering the means of grace to the world, the deacon is authorized to preside at the celebration of the sacraments. Presiding at the celebration of the sacraments involves taking responsibility to lead the gathered community in celebrating baptism and Holy Communion.”¹

Closing statement at General Conference 2020/2024 before the vote to approve legislation for expanded sacramental authority for deacons:

“The decision of this body to grant sacramental authority to deacons is a missional one. In 1784, John Wesley founded the Methodist movement for this very reason - to extend the sacraments to places where the Church of England was unwilling to offer them. Wesley’s three simple rules culminate with “attend to the ordinances of God” which includes the sacraments. Deacons often find ourselves in places where the mission of God is being extended outside the walls of the church and where elders are not always present to offer the converting sacraments of Holy Communion and Baptism. These places include prisons, nursing homes, homeless shelters, camping and retreat centers, hospitals, and many other marginal and liminal places ... In our liturgy we pray that God would pour out the Holy Spirit on us and on the bread and wine that we may be for the world the body of Christ, redeemed by Jesus’ blood. Granting sacramental authority to deacons will free us as a church for joyful obedience to extend the witness of God’s saving love and forgiveness into all the world. It will allow us to live into Wesley’s belief that the world is truly our parish. The committee recommends that the body support this petition.”

¹ Persons using this document are highly encouraged to read sections of *The 2020/2024 Book of Discipline* on which this document draws, including paragraphs 326, 328, 329, 331. Contributors to this document include Rev. Lindsey Baynam Freeman, Rev. Dr. Geoffrey Lentz, and Rev. Emily Kincaid

I. Introduction

- A. Missional Purpose: The granting of sacramental authority to deacons is a missional decision rooted in United Methodist history, following John Wesley's principle of ensuring the sacraments are accessible where they are needed most. The United Methodist proclamation that Christ's table is open to all is now amplified by the ability of deacons to extend the invitation to the world.
- B. Historical Precedent: Wesley's authorization of sacramental leadership outside traditional church structures aligns with the current expansion of deacons' roles.
- C. Contextual Ministry: Deacons often serve in settings where elders are unavailable, such as prisons, hospitals, shelters, and retreat centers. Like the parable of the Great Feast, Deacons join the work of God in the world, extending the table to "*invite everyone to the wedding banquet (Matthew 22).*"
- D. Servant Leadership: When deacons preside over the sacraments, it highlights the servant ministry to which all Christians are called. Scripture describes Jesus' role as that of a deacon (*Romans 15:8*). At the Last Supper, Jesus presided over the meal with an act of service—washing the disciples' feet (*John 13*). In a similar act of service, St. Philip, one of the first ordained deacons, baptized the Ethiopian eunuch (*Acts 8*), extending the sacramental ministry of the church to the marginalized. When deacons preside over the sacraments, the church is reminded of Jesus' own teaching and example: "*Whoever wants to be first must be last of all and servant (deacon) of all*" (*Mark 9:35*). All sacramental authority comes from Jesus, and it is never about ruling over others, but about serving them (*Matthew 20:24-26*).

II. Theological and Liturgical Foundations

- A. Sacramental Theology: The sacraments are means of grace through which Christ's presence is made known. John Wesley described Holy Communion as a "converting sacrament" which means that a person can encounter the living God by participating in the sacrament. In the Sacrament of Holy Baptism, "we are initiated into Christ's holy church, ... incorporated into God's mighty acts of salvation and given new birth through water and the Spirit," the Introduction to the Baptismal Covenant says. "All this is God's gift, offered to us without price."

- B. UMC Liturgical Standards: Deacons should use approved liturgical resources from *The United Methodist Book of Worship* and ensure faithful adherence to theological integrity.
 - C. Connectional Accountability: Deacons remain under the supervision of their bishop/district superintendent and should collaborate with elders in their ministry settings.
- III. Contextual Appropriateness of Sacramental Authority
- A. Where Sacraments Are Needed: Deacons should discern where their sacramental authority is contextually necessary.
 - B. Collaboration with Elders: Whenever possible, deacons should coordinate with elders to ensure the sacraments are provided within the connectional system. In the local church, the elder is ordained and appointed to order the life of that church. Deacons should never attempt to usurp the authority of an elder within the local church setting. Likewise, elders should work collaboratively with deacons in administering the sacraments. Ultimately, the sacraments are gifts to be stewarded and shared, not resources to be hoarded.
 - C. Training and Preparation: Deacons should engage in theological and practical training for presiding over sacraments to ensure proper understanding and reverence.
 - D. Associate Pastor: If a deacon is appointed to be an associate pastor at a local church, it is contextually appropriate to celebrate sacraments in that setting. The deacon should have the same sacramental authority as an elder in a similar clergy position.
 - E. Interfaith settings: Deacons should be sensitive to interfaith and ecumenical settings where celebrating sacraments is contextually inappropriate.
 - F. Deacons Appointed to be the Pastor-In-Charge: If a deacon is appointed to be the pastor-in-charge of the local church, the deacon does not need to receive a license for ministry. The deacon has sacramental authority to perform the sacraments by virtue of their ordination.
- IV. Accountability and Oversight
- A. Bishop's Authority: Deacons remain under the episcopal authority and should regularly communicate with their bishop through their district superintendent regarding their sacramental ministry.
 - B. Annual Conference Guidelines: Each annual conference may provide specific policies on deacons' sacramental responsibilities. These guidelines should be reviewed by the resident bishop, Board of Ordained Ministry executive committee

- C. Local Church and Ministry Setting Cooperation: Deacons should work in partnership with local churches, chaplains, or ministry settings to avoid redundancy or conflict.
- V. V. Practical Implementation
 - A. Preparation for Administering Sacraments:
 - 1. Ensure proper elements are used (e.g., bread and unfermented grape juice).
 - 2. Follow The United Methodist Book of Worship liturgy.
 - 3. Create a reverent and inclusive worship space.
 - B. Record Keeping:
 - 1. Maintain records of baptisms.
 - 2. Report sacramental activity to the charge conference as required.
 - C. Ecumenical Considerations:
 - 1. Where applicable, work with ecumenical partners in ministry settings to ensure unity and respect for diverse traditions.
 - D. Ethical Considerations
 - 1. Avoiding Sacramental Abuse: Deacons should exercise sacramental authority responsibly and within the context of their ministry setting.
 - E. Maintaining Theological Integrity: Sacraments should always be administered in a way that reflects the Wesleyan perspective of God's grace.
 - F. Respecting the Connectional System: Deacons should recognize their role as servants who connect the church to the world, ensuring sacramental ministry serves the mission rather than personal preference.
- VI. VII. Conclusion
 - A. A Call to Joyful Obedience: Deacons are now empowered to extend the sacraments into places of need, embodying Wesley's vision that "the world is our parish."
 - B. Ongoing Reflection and Adaptation: As this new authority is implemented, deacons and the church should remain in conversation to refine best practices and uphold the integrity of sacramental ministry.